THE ROLE OF THE TRANSITIONAL PROGRAM IN THE REVOLUTIONARY PROCESS

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Three Talks by George Novack
(All emphasis by the Web Ed.)

"These talks on the Transitional Program of the Fourth International and its uses in the history of American Trotskyism were first given at the educational sessions following the convention of the Socialist Workers Party in August, 1971- They were designed to explain the purpose of the program as a means of mobilizing the masses for anticapitalist action.

"The following publications can be consulted for further information about its significance."

*"*Discussions with Leon Trotsky on the Transitional Program" in *Writings of Leon Trotsky (1938-39), pp. 43-45; pp. 48-52; Leon Trotsky on the Labor Party in the United States pp. 21-27.* Both available from Pathfinder Press.

*The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International,*available from Pathfinder Press.

Key Problems of the Transition from Capitalism to Socialism, 3 articles by Pierre Prank, George Novack and Ernest Mandel, available from Pathfinder Press.

A Transitional Program for Black Liberation, available from Pathfinder Press.

The Worldwide Youth Radicalization and the Tasks of the Fourth International, available from Pathfinder Press.

The Struggle for Chicano Liberation, International Socialist Review *(SWP, New York --ed.),* November 1971; also available in pamphlet form from Pathfinder Press.

Toward a Mass Feminist Movement, International Socialist Review *(SWP, New York),* November 1971; also available in pamphlet form from Pathfinder Press.

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I. THE BACKGROUND AND FUNCTION OF THE TRANSITIONAL PROGRAM

The *Transitional Program* is only part of the fundamental program of the Fourth International. The full constituents of its program are drawn from the entire experience of the revolutionary Marxist movement from the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848 to the latest resolutions of the world body.

At the same time the *Transitional Program* is for us the most important and relevant part of the total teachings of our movement because it presents a method of approach and a set of proposals aimed at mobilizing the masses for revolutionary action. It proceeds from the objective conditions and the existing level of consciousness of the workers and other sections of the oppressed to lead them, step by step, through the education they receive in the course of their struggles, to the realization of the necessity for the conquest of power.

The *Transitional Program* was written by Trotsky on the eve of the Second World War and adopted by the founding congress of the Fourth International in 1958. The conception of such a program was not new in the Marxist movement. As Pierre Frank explains in his introduction to the French edition, it has such precedents as the list of demands at the conclusion of the *Communist Manifesto* and the programs of the Second and Third Internationals, of the Bolshevik Party, and of the German Spartacists led by Luxemburg and Liebknecht.

This particular document came out of the conditions of the 1930s. The first sketch for such a program of action was drafted in the spring of 1934 by the French Communist League with Trotsky's help (he was then living incognito in France). The next year the Belgian comrades wrote a similar program.

The Socialist Workers Party *(USA--ed.)* was intimately involved in the production of the present *Transitional Program*. When Trotsky was preparing the draft for the founding congress of the Fourth International he asked our party to adopt it and sponsor it at the congress, and we did so. One of our delegates was the reporter on that program at the 1938 congress.

More than that, at Trotsky's request, a delegation of our leaders went to Mexico City a few months beforehand to discuss the contents of the document and work it out together with him. The discussion held at those sessions with Trotsky has been reprinted in *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1938-39]* and *Leon Trotsky on the Labor Party in the United States* (both available from Pathfinder Press. So when critics declare that we don't know what the *Transitional Program* is all about or how to apply it, we have reason to be skeptical of the charge.

The *Transitional Program,* was not engendered exclusively out of the bright thoughts of a single individual. We have no such abominations as "Maotsetung Thought" in our movement. It was the fruit of the diverse experiences of the sections of the Fourth International in. the class struggles of the 1930s and before.

Trotsky emphasized this when he wrote in 1938 that the significance of the program is not that it set up an *a priori* theoretical scheme or blueprint that the struggles of the masses were obliged to conform to. Rather, it "draws the balance of the already accumulated experience of our national sections and on the basis of this experience opens up broader international perspectives. The acceptance of this program, prepared for and assured by a lengthy previous discussion, or rather, a whole series of discussions, represents our most capital conquest. The Fourth International is now the only international organization which not only takes clearly into account the driving forces of the imperialist epoch but is armed with a system of transitional demands which are capable of uniting the masses for a revolutionary struggle for power."

The Fourth International remains the only international movement equipped with this valuable instrument of orientation. The Moscow-line Communist parties, the Maoists, Titoists,* the followers of Castro, the Social Democrats, the New Leftists, the anarcho-spontaneists — none of the other tendencies operating among the anticapitalist forces have developed anything like it. This is one of our advantages over them.
*(*supporters of Marshall Tito, dissident leader of the Yugoslavian soviet federation until about 1990 – Web Ed.)*

One structural aspect of the original *Transitional Program* is of considerable importance, though this often goes unnoticed by its readers. It is divided into four distinct sections, each referring to different areas of struggle. The first and longest part pertains to the situation in the advanced countries. Properly so, because the evolution and outcome of the class struggle there is ultimately decisive for the cause of world socialism.

The second relates to the colonial and semicolonial countries; the third to the fascist regimes; and the fourth to the Soviet Union and by extension to other deformed or degenerated workers states.

This in itself is evidence that the *Transitional Program* is not a uniform and static set of demands, fixed once and for all, which is to be swallowed whole and mechanically imposed in a stereotyped manner on any and all situations regardless of time, place and circumstances. Marxist logic teaches that "the truth is concrete." This rule has to be applied to the use of the *Transitional Program* as well as to every other item of our arsenal of ideas. The relevant parts of the program have to be brought forward in accord with an intelligent and informed appraisal of the actual conditions and adapted to the specific state of' the ongoing class struggle.

The Transitional Program contains three different kinds of proposals for action. One group concerns human rights and civil liberties granted in many codes of law and constitutions and calls for their granting, restitution or broadening: freedom of the press and assembly, the right to have unions, the slogan of self-determination are examples of this type. These are "democratic" demands *(i.e, demands which are historically tasks to be accomplished under bourgeois rule, not socialist rule --ed.)* and they can be very explosive under conditions of severe repression and the restriction of rights by an authoritarian ruling power bourgeois or bureaucratic.

Then there are partial or immediate demands which are connected with the everyday struggles of the masses in defense of their conditions of life and labor: a raise in wages, a relaxation of speedup, an end to a wage-freeze or the improvement in welfare standards fall into this category.

The third category constitutes the heart of the *Transitional Program* because these demands are directed against the foundations of capitalist property, power and privilege. If militantly and massively acted upon by the workers, these can challenge the capitalist regime and move the masses toward the creation of a new and independent base of power. Most of the demands in the program, notably the proposals for factory committees, workers' control of production, a workers' militia and the expropriation of separate groups of capitalists, belong to the category of "transitional" demands as such. These are crowned by the call for the formation of councils or Soviets.

These demands have a central place because they logically build up to and lead on to the acquisition of power by the workers, the essence of anticapitalist revolution. At the same time the other demands are interconnected with them. The fight for "democratic" and "partial" demands in conjunction with the key "transitional" proposals can become powerful accelerators of mass mobilization. All depends upon the vigor of the mass offensive and the kind of leadership it gets.

For instance, the struggle for an objective like Black control of the Black communities or for independence of the Québécois, which are democratic demands, can set popular masses into motion against the existing centralized state in a nationalist confrontation with highly revolutionary implications.

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The *Transitional Program* was written and adopted over thirty years ago. Colossal changes have occurred in the world since then. The Second World War was fought; fascism has been wiped out in Western Europe; the colonial revolution has surged up on four continents; there are now fourteen workers states instead of one; the U.S. has become the Goliath of imperialism and is meeting its David in Vietnam; neocapitalism has developed; nuclear weapons menace the perpetuation of the human race. In the face of such developments the *Transitional Program* could not remain, as it was, frozen in a fast-changing world situation. It has had to be amplified, adjusted, concretized to take these upheavals and transformations into account and cope with them. *(Emphasis by the Web Ed.)*

*S*ome slogans have become less directly relevant; others are more urgent and immediately applicable. Slogans, for instance, that deal with problems which are paramount during periods of economic crisis are not suitable for boom conditions, and vice versa. The demands for the postcapitalist societies can be made more precise and comprehensive since the resistance to the ultrabureaucratic regimes has grown, asserted itself openly in East Germany in 1953, Poland and Hungary in 1956, Czechoslovakia in 1968 and increasingly within the Soviet Union itself. Further demands will be brought to

the fore as the preconditions for an antibureaucratic upsurge for socialist democracy continue to ripen in this sector.

The most remarkable fact about the *Transitional Program* is not the necessity for such amendments and the character of such adaptations but the substantial validity of its method and contents after three decades of turbulent world history. It is not too much to say that this **multi-purpose toolkit for revolutionary mass action** is more timely, more applicable to the problems posed by this era of permanent revolution than when it was conceived. In connection with these talks I suggest reading the original text entitled *The Death Agony of Capitalism*;* the collection of articles in *Key Problems of the Transition from Capitalism to Socialism** by Pierre Frank, Ernest Mandel and myself; and the previously mentioned discussion with Trotsky on the program. *(*pamphlets available from the webmaster by request)*

Instead of offering a digest of these documents, I propose to discuss how the Trotskyist movement has sought to explore and explain the new phenomena of our time and utilized the method of the *Transitional Program* to answer the problems they pose.

The opponents of Marxism, and the New Left critics of Leninism and Trotskyism, accuse us of being dogmatists who endlessly repeat antiquated ideas and advance obsolete formulas without taking into account changed conditions and working out independent solutions to novel problems. Their wish is father to a rather malicious thought. The charge is baseless, but then I suppose "any stigma is good enough to beat a dogma with."

Socialist reformism and Stalinism are certainly guilty of dogmatism, formalism and fossilism in the sphere of theory — and they have other faults. But authentic Marxism has been as creative as it has been self-critical in the twentieth century. It has managed to keep abreast of changing times to a far greater extent than any rival school of thought.

Trotsky took note of this aspect of innovation in his brochure on "Stalinism and Bolshevism." He there observed that "the Bolshevik party was able to carry on its magnificent 'practical work' only because it illuminated all its steps with theory, the theory of Marxism." "But Marxism," he went on, "is a theory of movement, not of stagnation. Only events on a tremendous historical scale could enrich the theory itself. Bolshevism brought an invaluable contribution to Marxism in its analysis of the imperialist epoch as an epoch of wars and revolutions; of bourgeois democracy in the era of decaying capitalism; of the correlation between the general strike and the insurrection; of the role of the party, Soviets and trade unions in the period of proletarian revolution; in its theory of the soviet state, of the economy of transition; of fascism and Bonapartism in the epoch of capitalist decline; finally in its analysis of the degeneration of the Bolshevik party itself and of the soviet state."

It could have been added that Trotsky himself made prodigious theoretical contributions to Marxism in his celebrated theory of the permanent revolution, in his formulation of the law of uneven and combined development, and in his

program for the regeneration of workers democracy in a diseased workers state.*(Emphasis by the Web Ed.)*

That work has been carried forward by the leaders of the Fourth International up to today. In his report to the 1969 world congress on the resolution regarding "The New Upsurge of the World Revolution." Comrade Germain alluded to some of the problems arising from new developments that the theoreticians of our movement have been grappling with. He mentioned Black nationalism in the United States, the economic contradictions of neocapitalism that his own writings have done so much to clarify, the economic problems of the transition from capitalism to socialism, the sociology of the student revolt, the elaboration of a more extensive transitional program for the workers states, the analysis of the bureaucratic bourgeoisie and state capitalism in semi-colonial countries like Egypt, Syria, Burma and Algeria; and the elements of a transitional program for the youth movement. The task confronting our Canadian cothinkers of devising a correct program and perspective for the revolutionary forces in Quebec could be added to this list.

Two of these current problems rank high among our own preoccupations.

One is the creation of a set of demands for the Black liberation struggle in the U.S. The original draft of the Transitional Program does not mention Black nationalism for the reason that it was not an urgent issue and major political factor even in the Black communities in 1938, apart from Garveyism which had passed its peak. The more militant and politically-energetic elements in the Black communities then turned hopefully toward the resurgent industrial unionism.

Nationalist sentiment has crystallized on an organized mass scale in this country only within the past fifteen years. As it emerged and unfolded, the American Trotskyists have been obliged to follow its successive stages and give a theoretical analysis of its motive forces, principal features and aims as well as offering guidelines for effective intervention in its struggles.

They were greatly aided in this task by the method of Marxism, the positions worked out by Lenin and the Bolsheviks on the national question in our era, and by the acute previsions of Trotsky contained in the pamphlet "Leon Trotsky on Black Nationalism and Self-Determination." Nonetheless, with all these as guides, it has been no simple matter to assess the course of the Afro-American struggles over the past period and chart the next necessary steps for its forward movement.

We can claim a certain amount of success in this theoretical-political work. It is widely recognized in radical circles, Black and white, that the SWP outstripped all other tendencies in grasping the importance of Black nationalism, beginning with the emergence of Malcolm X even within the sectarian bounds of the Nation of Islam, and evolving a proper attitude and alignment in respect to it.

The variety and volume of the literature we have published on this subject, including the contributions of George Breitman, and the amount of its sales and circulation alone attest to that initiative. All this indicates the capacity of our cadres to recognize what is new in a mass ferment and adjust our views, strategy and tactics accordingly. That would not have been possible without the aid of the theory of the permanent revolution and the law of uneven and combined development taken from Trotsky's teachings.

The movement for Black liberation is a complex and contradictory fusion of two different trends; a national-democratic thrust of powerful proportions for self-determination that is combined with a proletarian struggle against the monopoly capitalist structure. All those who fail to understand the dual character and special characteristics of this movement, like Progressive Labor *(Maoist --ed.),* the Workers League *(ultra-left sectarian Trotskyists --ed.)* and others, on the one side, and the pure and simple Black nationalists on the other, are bound to go astray in comprehending its dynamics and orienting correctly toward its line of development.

"The Transitional Program for Black Liberation," adopted at the 1969 SWP convention is the latest contribution of our movement to the acute problems facing Black militants at the present juncture. What is the current situation? After fifteen years of strenuous efforts, counting many victims, the march toward Black emancipation is floundering. It is unorganized, even disorganized, on a national scale, without authoritative leadership and groping for the way forward. What are the next steps that have to be taken on the road to revolution?

The document advances a set of answers to this crucial question. It explains the necessity for a transitional program of mass action as well as for the formation of a Black party to organize and lead the struggle. It suggests points for its program and tries to reply to some objections raised by the reformists and ultralefts who for different reasons reject the concept of such an approach. *(Emphasis by the Web Ed.)*

This pioneering project is certainly susceptible of improvement and modification, as the Black struggle deepens, broadens and intensifies. But it arises out of the experiences of the revolution both internationally and nationally and seeks to steer the movement toward the goal of emancipation from oppression by helping to organize the ghetto masses into the most formidable force for action.

Another significant contribution to socialist thought has an international rather than a national scope. This is the document on the worldwide youth radicalization submitted to the 1969 world congress of the Fourth International for discussion. It was written in response to the challenge presented by the youth rebelliousness which has become a major actor in world politics in recent years.

The dimensions, depth and duration of the youth revolt and the political impact it has had in so many countries is genuinely new and has taken everyone by surprise. Ever since the 1848 revolutions in Europe there have been eruptions by students and dissident youth. Student demonstrations have been a familiar phenomenon in colonial lands for a long time. But the current upheavals far surpass anything that has happened

before, both in their extent and their implications, as the May 1970 national student strike in the U.S. demonstrated.

The document delves into the social and economic causes for the unprecedented scope, intensity and importance of the student revolts and shows their deep roots in the changes in the processes of production and their influence upon the restructuring of the educational system. This revolt has a durable basis and an irrepressible character. It will not diminish, despite wide fluctuations, but will mount in vigor. It therefore requires a general orientation, a set of demands, that can steer it in a progressive direction.

The projected program revolves around the central concept of the [“]red university,[“] or revolutionizing university; for example the Black university as adapted to Afro-American needs or the Francophone university in Quebec. This policy is directed against the positions of the reformists who seek to restrict changes to the purely university issues, isolating developments there from the larger questions of the day, as well as against the ultra-Lefts who propose to "blow up" the institution, or those who quit the campus for work in the neighborhood or the factory under the slogans of serving the people or proletarianizing the petty-bourgeois students.

As opposed to these one-sided strategies, the Trotskyists seek to convert the university and other educational institutions into an instrumentality for transforming society. This is to be achieved by opening it to the permeation of revolutionary ideas and influences, placing it at the disposal of the most progressive elements in the community and the country, and effecting an alliance in action of the students and progressive faculty members with the anticapitalist forces.

Obviously, neither the university as such, nor its student body or faculty, can by themselves overthrow the ruling powers and change society. They lack the economic power and social weight for so tremendous a task. But experience has already shown that under certain circumstances students and youth are capable of initiating struggles that are not only significant on their own account but have galvanizing effects upon the mood and movement of other, broader social forces.

The purpose of the program of democratic and transitional demands put forward for the youth is to indicate how their actions can be most effectively conducted and geared into the basic issues of the international class struggle.

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In order to dispel any mystery or mysticism about their uses, let me give several examples of our experiences with slogans of a traditional type over the past three decades. The *Transitional Program* contains a paragraph on support to a referendum on the question of declaring war. This is a democratic demand whose fulfillment would permit the people to express their distrust of the imperialist warmakers.

This proposal was first formulated in the slogan: "let the people vote on war." It stirred up a bit of controversy in the SWP ranks on the eve of the Second World War. Some comrades felt that it was dangerously reformist and would create and reinforce pacifistic illusions that capitalism and its rulers could preserve the peace and halt their march toward the coming bloodbath. They were mistaken. The campaign for such a nation-wide referendum was conceived as a means for alerting and mobilizing large numbers of people against the military preparations. Moreover, it would be accompanied on our part by a Marxist exposition of the root- causes of imperialist conflicts.

Our efforts did not get beyond the stage of general propaganda for the proposal before Pearl Harbor closed all public debate on the issue. Afterwards, it remained in our assemblage of antiwar slogans and was included in our postwar election programs. However, it met with no wide response during the Korean War and no actions were taken in accordance with it.

We advanced it again more vigorously as the Vietnam intervention unfolded. This time the response was different because of the mass sentiment against the war. Beginning with Dearborn, Michigan, where an ex-member was influential in the initiative, several big cities became involved in such referenda. Up to now the issue has been placed before the electorate on a citywide basis in San Francisco, Madison, Wisconsin and other places, and on the state level in Massachusetts with usually favorable results.

This record illustrates the ups-and-downs in the status of any component of the *Transitional Program*. A demand can start from the point of pure **propaganda** through our press and other media, to **agitation**, which reaches and influences a growing segment of the population, to **action** upon it, first in a sporadic and localized way and thereafter on a broader basis.

The second example has to do with the ["]sliding scale of wages["] as a weapon against inflation. This means that union contracts should provide for an automatic rise in wages in correspondence with increases in the price of consumer goods.

This proposal likewise remained in propaganda form in this country until the labor movement went through the experience of inflation during the Second World War and the lifting of price controls soon after the armistice. The auto workers union was one of the first to take up this demand in its negotiations with the corporations and won it from General Motors in 1948. It was called "the escalator clause."

Ever since, this provision has been one of the principal bones of contention between the bosses and the workers, the first seeking to deny, restrict or withdraw it, the second to obtain, keep and raise it. It provides the only protection between contracts against increases in the cost of living that degrade living standards. In the last two years the UAW (auto) has won it back through its strike and so have the steel workers.

The third example is familiar to the whole world as the central slogan of the antiwar movement: "Bring the Troops Home Now." This is not to be found in the 1938

program, although the idea of bridling the armed forces of an imperialist government and thereby aiding the struggle of its victims is an old one for revolutionary Marxists.

The SWP and YSA *(Young Socialist Alliance, the SWP's autonomous youth affiliate --ed.)* coined this slogan — or at least did most to popularize it. An expert in public relations recently complimented us on its simplicity. "Every word is one syllable and readily understandable by anyone," he observed. That aspect hadn't struck me before, even though we've improved it with the shorter version, "Out Now!" *(Emphasis by the Web Ed.)*

We launched the slogan because it fitted the situation. It defended the right of the Vietnamese to self-determination free of foreign interference; it opposed U.S. military intervention and could lead to its end; and it corresponded to the needs of the American people and the GIs *(rank-and-file army conscripts)* who are doing the fighting.

Yet, despite these merits, in 1965 our party was virtually the only one on the Left to put it forward. Today, however, it is supported by most of' the American people. Here is eloquent testimony to the power latent in a slogan directed against one of the pillars of the capitalist regime: its imperialist foreign policy and the instrument required to implement it.

The last example concerns the women' s liberation movement. The 1938 document advises the sections of the Fourth International to work out "with all possible concreteness" sets of transitional demands, not only for the industrial and agricultural workers, but for every part of the population oppressed and exploited by capitalism.

The resurgence of women's liberation is confronting our party with the responsibility for doing just this for that burgeoning movement. However, this task is not being undertaken in a void and could not be consummated in a hurry. In fact, it has barely begun.

The spirit and intent of the whole transitional approach is not to impose abstract slogans arbitrarily and ultimatistically upon a mass movement that is still in its infancy and in a state of flux and has yet to acquire well-defined characteristics, organization and direction.

The essence of our method is to size up the actual situation and its precise point of development, note the specific problems that most preoccupy the typical participants in the movement, and work out solutions to propose to them. As the *Transitional Program* states: "The advanced workers should learn to give clear and concrete answers to the questions put by their future allies." We speak for the advanced workers — and the oppressed sex is certainly not least among their future allies.

Our comrades in the feminist movement first singled out several key issues that had come to the fore which provided a basis for collective auction and helped promote the radicalization of women. Among these are the right to free abortion on demand, free birth control information and devices, 24-hour child care facilities

and equal pay for equal work. These served as guides for our activists and have been popularized through our press, meetings and electoral campaigns.

Since then our positions have been further concretized. On the one hand, these and other demands emerging from the discussions and experiences of the feminists have been incorporated into a more comprehensive program adapted to the requirements of the current stage of the women's liberation struggle in this country. The 1971 SWP convention adopted this in the form of a resolution entitled "Toward a Mass Feminist Movement", as it had previously done for the Black liberation and youth movements.

This document serves to amplify the program, clarify the strategy and broaden the perspectives of the feminist struggle. But that has been only one aspect of our work. On the other side, our comrades have singled out the demand for repeal of the abortion laws as the central slogan for action and organization in the first national campaign of the movement. Thus the widening of the program has gone hand in hand with the pinpointing of the main proposal for mass action.

This two-sided process of programmatic development should be especially instructive for newer comrades who in this case can follow, step by step, the way a set of transitional demands is selected, shaped and applied in accord with the concrete circumstances and pace of growth of a specific social struggle of direct concern to them.

The basic *Transitional Program* as well as its more recent adaptations to specific countries and sectors of the revolutionary arena is squarely counterposed to the methods of the reformist-Stalinist tendencies on the one hand, and to the ultralefts of all sorts. on the other. Neither or these camps has any need or use for the *Transitional Program*.

Trotsky once explained the main reasons for their indifference or open hostility. The reformists, he observed, have no need for a transitional program because they are content to remain within the ground of the democratic capitalist regime and do not intend to cross over to the opposite shore in combat for the revolutionary alternative.

The ultralefts have no use for the Transitional Program because, in their overheated imaginations, they have already leaped over the stages leading to the revolutionary showdown, even though the masses, the principal fighting force, may be lagging far behind. They see no need for a bridge to enable the masses to make the crossing from where they actually are to the barricades and beyond.

What both lack is an understanding of the dialectical method and the capacity to apply it to the realities of the evolution of the revolutionary movement. Marxism sees the interconnections and foresees the transitions between the different stages of the struggle. It takes careful note of the non-revolutionary stages of political development and the corresponding frame of mind of the masses and the possibility of underlying trends leading toward the emergence of pre-revolutionary and directly revolutionary situations.

Marxism keeps constantly on the alert for openings in which the elements of the *Transitional Program* can be inserted to help convert the less radicalized state

into a more radicalized one. It therefore serves as a link to connect one stage of the class struggle with another as well as to bring together diverse sectors of that struggle: without its timely intervention through a capable leadership the whole chain of actions by the masses can dangle in midair, be weakened and disoriented, and come to naught. That has happened many times over the past half century.

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What importance does the *Transitional Program* and its method of work have in the life of the Fourth International today a third of a century after its adoption? The Fourth International is itself in a transitional state in the process of its formation. In most places it is relatively weak in relation to other and older organizations, although it is gaining on them and at their expense. It is strong in ideas but poor in material resources. It is presently engaged in what Comrade Germain has called "the primitive accumulation of cadres."

Meanwhile, there are immense openings for our ideas and the expansion of our influence among the radicalized youth who are surging forward with the advance of the world revolution. This obliges our forces to participate ever more vigorously and daringly in the arena of action to win the best among these ardent rebels to our banner.

Before us is the task of transforming ourselves from groups of propagandists for a program and a set of ideas into parties of mass action and mass influence without falling into adventurism. The indispensable vehicle for effecting that change in the status and prospects of the Fourth International and its respective sections is the *Transitional Program* and its method of approach. "The present epoch," wrote Trotsky, "is distinguished not for the fact that it frees the revolutionary party from day-to-day work but because it permits this work to be carried on indissolubly with the actual tasks of the revolution."

II. THE ROLE OF " DEMOCRATIC DEMANDS" *(i.e., those slogans dealing with reforms historically realized with the bourgeois revolution but remaining partially or wholly un-achieved or requiring renewal today, remaining "tasks" to be realized in the fight for a socialist society – Web Ed.)*

This second talk will discuss the place of democratic demands and slogans in the transitional process. This is necessary because there's a great deal of misunderstanding and confusion on this subject.

A right can be defined as a just claim or title. [“]Democratic rights[“] are those acquired by or belonging to the people as a whole as against privileges restricted to ruling and possessing classes. [“]Human rights[“] are one thing and recognized civil liberties and legal rights are another. These two categories by no means coincide in the development of history, either *de jure (– in law)* or *de facto (– in reality*.)

A slave has no rights that the master is obligated to respect. He or she may have a claim to human rights in the abstract, but in slave systems no specific civil rights and very few legal rights. Such rights are the possession of a free people, a measure of

their actual or prospective self-determination. It is often not realized how much specific rights we possess are the products of historic development and social struggle. This is especially true of Americans who do not have a lively sense of history and tend to take for granted what has been acquired in the past.

For example, we assume without question that a person can live wherever he or she chooses, can get up and leave for another location if they don't like it where they happen to be. But a serf didn't have this elementary right. He was bound to the land and to the lord. It was only through the emergence of anti-feudal and bourgeois conditions of life and labor, which are not much older than half a millenium in Western civilization, that a large number of individuals threw off these bonds and assumed the right to go and live where they pleased as well as to sell their labor power freely on the market.

Of course, even today the right of free movement is not fully granted. A person can't exercise that right unless he or she has the material means to do so. Passports are not always granted to American citizens but can be denied or taken away, as happened to me for about 15 years. *(Novack was barred travel to Europe in the 1950s and 60s – Web Ed.)*

In the Soviet Union people are not allowed to leave the country at will. It's treason, it's a capital crime to cross the borders of the Soviet Union without permission of the authorities. And some people dare to call this "socialism"! Our conception includes the elementary democratic right of anyone to go from one part of the planet to another without permission of the authorities.

We assume the right to call a mass meeting whenever we choose. Do you know that this right was in medieval times reserved or restricted to the state or the clerical authorities? It's included in the Bill of Rights to the U.S. Constitution because it was so often denied or violated in colonial days. As we know, large categories of citizens are still not given equal rights. This flagrant denial of justice accounts for the civil rights movement in the United States and in Ireland as well as for the demands of the feminist movement, the homosexual rights movement, and others.

There is probably more ferment to obtain and enlarge rights nowadays in this country than at any time in the past. That' s a symptom of a genuine mass ferment and one of the hallmarks of the present radicalization. In view of these facts, it's rather odd that some ultralefts maintain that revolutionists can be indifferent to demands for democratic reforms and accord them no place or importance in the revolutionizing of the masses.

I've discussed the evolution of democracy in the Western world in the recently published book, *Democracy and Revolution (see the contents index listed on this section of the website --ed.)* There, it is pointed out that the mass struggle for democracy in Europe began on a very rudimentary basis. The initial demands for democracy in the incipient stages of the bourgeois revolutions were for certain religious rights directed against the Catholic church which dominated peoples' lives and minds. This heretical movement became known as Protestantism or the Reformation.

The people demanded the right to choose their own pastors instead of having them designated by a lord or a bishop. They wanted to read the Bible in their own language, instead of Latin, so that they could understand it. They too were the children of the Lord, yet they couldn't hear or understand the scripture in which the word of the Lord was deposited. It had to be construed for them by the literate or half-literate priesthood. They wanted their own interpretation of the text, and their constructions of the will of the deity, reflecting their own specific social interests, more and more radically clashed with the ideas and institutions of the old regime. Their dissident religious re-interpretations became the vehicle of social demands.

From religious rights the plebians went on to demand political, legal and economic rights. The right to vote; the right to representation in Parliament, which was restricted in England, the mother of parliaments, to the upper classes; to a jury trial by peers; to the right to buy and sell commodities, including houses, land and labor power which was not possible under an authentic feudal regime.

Over the past five centuries the rights amassed by the peoples through their revolutionary efforts have been considerably enlarged, yet they are still lacking many elementary freedoms, including the right to have a job and earn a living, which is denied under capitalism.

The most extreme ultraleft error is the conception that because this is the epoch of capitalist decay and proletarian revolution, democratic slogans have somehow become outmoded or superseded, and therefore revolutionists cannot advance or even support them. A less categorical version of this sectarianism is the position, sometimes found in our own ranks, that democratic demands are in and themselves inferior to transitional ones, less revolutionizing, less important, purely peripheral, and episodic. The democratic slogans, it is considered, are petty-bourgeois, reformist in implication, and not really proletarian.

There is no basis for such a view in the *Transitional Program* itself. They simply overlook or flout what the text itself says. I pointed out in the first talk that the program's structure falls into four parts applied to different areas of the struggle for the emancipation of humanity in our era. I**n three of these, the backward countries, the fascist regimes and the degenerated workers states, the struggle for democratic slogans is accorded a most prominent place. It's explicitly stated for the colonial countries that "democratic slogans, transitional demands and the problems of the socialist revolution are not divided into separate historical epochs in this struggle, but stem directly from one another." All three are linked together. It's emphasized that the struggle for revolutionary democracy by the workers and peasants, primarily for national liberation and agrarian reform, grows over into the struggle for workers' power in the process of permanent revolution.** *(Emphasis by Web Ed.)*

Three democratic demands are raised in the section of the program devoted to the antiwar struggle in the original draft, which are pertinent to our present situation. These are the proposal to let the people vote on war and peace already discussed, the demand to give 18 year-olds the right to vote (which is an

answer to those who say that none of the demands in the program are realizable under capitalism, since this has just been won in the United States), and the call for the abolition of secret diplomacy. The Pentagon Papers has just made this last point a very popular issue. Thus the various elements in the *Transitional Program* spring to life in the whole process of history in our time. One by one they become translated from paper and ink into significant stimuli of mass action.

Moreover, it would be rather odd for a party and an International whose program proclaims that it stands for democracy in its own movement, and fights for workers democracy everywhere, to be indifferent to, or unconcerned with, the struggles of the masses for a larger measure of democratic decision-making in every sphere of life. In fact the Trotskyist movement aspires to be the foremost protector and promoter of genuine democracy against all antidemocratic and authoritarian forces, institutions, laws and regimes.

How do we approach the problem of fighting for democracy in our time? For us, democratic slogans are viewed in the same light, and directed towards the same ends, as the other elements of the *Transitional Program*. They're levers for the mobilization of the masses with the aim of improving their situation and at the same time opposing and combating the capitalist state and any authoritarian or bureaucratic regime. To be sure, democratic slogans have a less pronounced class character than those involving action by the proletariat, such as workers control of production, but in conjunction with the most deep-going proletarian slogans, they can promote the creation of a dual power based on the workers that can overturn capitalist property and power.

This means that democratic slogans, or their partial or total realization under bourgeois or bureaucratic regimes, are not ends in themselves. That's the outlook and orientation of reformism and opportunism. For revolutionary Marxism, by contrast, the struggle for the attainment of greater democracy in any field is a means to the establishment of a workers power which can really institute a socialist democracy. The purpose of democratic slogans and their implementation in action is to effect a change in the power relations between the classes to the advantage of the exploited and oppressed.

In the second place, we seek to implement such slogans not merely by petitions or letters to congressmen but through extra-parliamentary action, by the direct intervention of the masses, and not exclusively through the parliamentary mechanism, although we don't disdain that channel as an auxiliary vehicle that has its uses and value. It is interesting that Sean Kenny, the spokesman for the Irish Republican Army, said yesterday that the main issue causing the split in their movement at their last convention was whether or not the IRA should participate in parliament for revolutionary purposes. Anyone acquainted with the history of the IRA knows what a tremendous change this has involved. This rebel group has been in principle against the method of Leninism, or participation in parliament, and yet through bitter, bloody experience over the past fifty years, they have come to recognize that this type of electoral activity can be an auxiliary arm for the promotion of their movement.

Let me illustrate these points by reference to a concrete case that may never have been brought to your notice, though it did concern our international

movement a quarter of a century ago. On May 28, 1971, the Italian government celebrated the 25th anniversary of the establishment of the republic. The House of Savoy, which came to rule Italy in the mid-l9th century, had entered into complicity with Mussolini's fascists, then with the generals who succeeded him, and was an instrument of the Anglo-American occupiers after Mussolini's fall. Its discreditment generated a tidal wave of antimonarchical sentiment directed against the incumbent young King Humbert, who had succeeded his father after the war in an attempt to rescue the throne. When the anti-monarchical feeling rose to a peak in 1946, he refused to abdicate.

There were three lines put forward by the left tendencies in Italy at that juncture. The ultralefts declared "We want neither a monarchy nor a republic, but Soviets." They gave no place or value to the mass movement in its thrust toward a republic. The reformists, comprising the Social Democrats and Stalinists who were then participating in the government, said: "Let the people vote on the question." This seems formally very democratic. But what they had in view was to keep the movement strictly within electoral and parliamentary limits. They feared to stimulate any independent action of the masses for the overthrow of the monarchy and the institution of a republic.

The revolutionists, for their part, proposed the organization of committees to struggle against the monarchy, and the calling of a general strike by the unions to replace the monarchy with a republic. What kind of a republic was deliberately left open, as an algebraic formula, on the realistic premise that once the committees of action began organizing the masses under the general democratic slogan for a republic, the movement could bypass a reconstructed bourgeois regime and go forward to a workers and peasants republic. In other words, the Marxists called upon the workers to create organs of revolutionary power proceeding from their autonomous struggle for a democratic republic around which they could mobilize other layers of the population.

What happened? The monarchy had such little backing among all sections of the population that it was replaced bloodlessly. A plebiscite was held on the question on June 2, 1946 and the republic proclaimed. This was the most effective solution of a difficult problem for the bourgeoisie, which sacrificed the monarchy to save its property. In this task the Stalinists and Social Democrats, who feared the mobilization of the masses, helped them out. This was one of the defaults that helped to cut off the revolutionary upsurge in Italy and stabilize the capitalist republic which is still there today.

> This event brings up the question of the qualitative difference between the defense of democracy, of the rights of the people, and the defense of the bourgeois-democratic regime. These two are quite different and should not be identified. The sectarians do so unfavorably while the reformists do so favorably. Marxists do not defend or support any of the bourgeois democracies, which are today all imperialist or satellites of imperialism. We would, of course, fight, even arms in hand, with proletarian methods of mass action against any attempts by reactionaries to destroy a parliamentary regime and replace it with an outright dictatorial one, whether Bonapartist *(crisis personal rule over a parliamentary regime – Web Ed.),* militarist or fascist. We prefer a democratic bourgeois regime, just as we prefer democracy in any

and all institutions to an authoritarian setup because it is more favorable to the organization and struggle of the working class for their emancipation. But our historical task is not to maintain the stratus quo in any of its political structures, but to do away with the rule of the bourgeoisie in all its forms and replace it with a workers government.

The mass struggle for democratic reforms is important because it can facilitate this aim. When democratic slogans, like the republic versus the monarchy, are raised in public controversy, and the reformists try to keep the campaign within the narrow framework of substituting one bourgeois form of sovereignty for another as a way of cheating the workers, Marxists strive to turn the movement in an opposite direction through stimulating and organizing the revolutionary action of the masses. Thus it can boomerang against the reformists and ultimately get rid of the possessing classes.

In any event, we don't take a sterile abstentionist attitude when issues of democracy are before the people or any section of them. We are interventionists, we are activists. We try to take hold of these questions and use them for revolutionary purposes, to win the sympathy and support of greater and greater numbers of people. All our campaigns for civil liberties in this country, from the exposure of the *(Stalin-era)* Moscow trial frameups in the 1930s to the Minneapolis labor case *(Great Teamsters' strike of 1934 led by militants who became leaders of the SWP --ed.)* and the Bloomington case up to the effort to have an existence and maintain a headquarters in Houston, Texas, had this aim *(as reported in the US-SWP journal* The Militant).

It's important to remember that any slogan or demand can be misused, perverted and curtailed by forces hostile to the interests of the masses. This is especially true of democratic demands. There can be a lot of demagogy and chicanery in regard to them. The slogan of a republic, for example, was abused by the reformists in Italy not to advance toward workers' power, which was perfectly possible under the given circumstances, but to steer the movement into safe channels.

The *Transitional Program* warns against the danger that under certain circumstances a democratic slogan can become "a noose around the neck of the proletariat" because it may serve to restrain rather than to stimulate their autonomous class action and trick them out of gains they have actually acquired. A dramatic example was the conflict between the Constituent Assembly and the Soviets in 1917-1918. One of the chief demands of the Bolsheviks prior to 1917 and during the revolution was for the convocation of a [“]constituent assembly[“] *(an assembly of citizen delegates from all walks of life elected by popular local committees struck with task of deciding on a new constitution --Web Ed.)* to set up a new government after Czarism was overthrown. They were ardent propagandists for this.

Meanwhile, the masses had formed the Soviets which in October took the power before the Constituent Assembly could be convened. Then the question was posed: did the Constituent Assembly have the same usefulness for democracy and for the revolution that it had before the Soviets of workers, peasants and soldiers had actually concentrated the power in their hands and were already proceeding to construct the

new order? The Bolsheviks pointed out that the Constituent Assembly had turned into its opposite. It had become the rallying point for all the reactionary and counter-revolutionary elements in the country. By their action in October, by their support to the Soviet power, which genuinely represented the interests of the workers and peasants, the Soviets had the right to take away from the Constituent Assembly elected before October the right to set up an alternative and retrogressive sovereignty. This was done by the dispersion of the delegates.

The general warning against the abuse of democratic slogans signifies that no specific democratic slogan, not even the totality of democratic demands, can be taken in isolation from the given circumstances, or from the rest of the transitional demands. They go hand in hand with the other elements of the program. Democratic slogans must be interrelated and integrated with the others in the *Transitional Program* which, as previously explained, is composed of three major ingredients: transitional demands, partial or immediate demands, and democratic ones. All three complement and reinforce one another. As Hegel said, the truth is in the whole, not in any one of its parts. The urging of any particular slogan is a tactical means to the strategic goal of constituting a dual power of workers which can become a sovereign power.

Instructive in this connection is the following excerpt from *The Worldwide Youth Radicalization and the Tasks of the Fourth International* (p. 22):

> "Because of the decay of the capitalist system, and the erosion of democratic conquests, made in some instances almost two centuries ago, many of today's student struggles begin over the most elementary issues, such as the right of free speech. However, they tend to develop beyond this level quite rapidly, going beyond the campus, beyond the framework of democratic freedom as conceived in the most revolutionary phases of capitalism in its rise, reaching into the economic area, and bringing up problems that can actually be solved only under a socialist system. A clear understanding of this logical progression makes it possible to advance a consistent series of interlocking slogans that can readily be adjusted for particular situations. Above all it facilitates the recognition of suitable slogans of this type originating from the ranks in combat."

This brings us to the misconception that democratic slogans are second-rate stuff that have to be flushed down the drain as quickly as possible, that a red-blooded Red will have as little to do with them as possible, if not reject them from the outset. This underestimates their importance. The specific weight of a particular democratic demand, and such proposals in general, depends upon a whole complex of concrete circumstances. Black control of the Black community is an expression of the democratic right of self-determination. Who can tell in advance how explosive this or the comparable demand of the Chicanos *(Mexican Americans – Ed.)* can be? Once this type of slogan becomes a motive force among millions of militant Blacks and Chicanos in the major cities of the foremost imperialism or in the southwest, it can be the propulsion for insurrectionary actions at a climactic point in the movement, for Black or Chicano liberation. Similarly, for that matter in regard to the liberation of the Québécois *(see the 1972 L.S.O. document "A Program of Combat for an Independent and Socialist Quebec" in the Quebec section of this Website – Ed.)*

> The important point is to recognize the potential of a mass struggle for the extension of democracy. Neither the extent nor the intensity of the results can be measured precisely beforehand because that often depends upon the energy of the intervention of the vanguard. An excellent illustration of the importance of this subjective factor was provided by the action of our Canadian co-thinkers through the campaign they undertook against the Emergency Laws last year when all the other tendencies were inert or went underground. Remember that all our defense cases and campaigns — and they form a very significant part of our activity — are struggles for democratic rights. The point is that we conduct these in a realistic manner befitting socialist revolutionaries.

The role that a struggle for democratic demands can play is being exemplified by the national campaign for full legalization of abortion, which we initiated. This is built around a democratic demand for women's as well as for human rights since men and children are also affected by restrictions on abortion. This is presently the key demand of the mass action aspect of the national feminist movement. It's thoroughly in consonance with the spirit and method of the *Transitional Program*, because it aims to mobilize large numbers of the oppressed from a particular social layer for concerted action against capitalist-clerical repression. The struggle for women's equality is in itself a struggle for democracy.

This example, among others, shows how off the mark any disparagement of the movement for democratic demands is. It would impede and derail effective participation in vital social struggles. If we took such an approach, as some advise us to do, we would be crippled from the start and get nowhere very fast.

> Or take the campaign of the Student Mobilization Committee for high school rights. Almost all of them are democratic demands. That's the way high-schoolers can best be organized at their present point of development. Democratic demands are often all-important in the initial stages of a struggle when the task is to reach just awakening people, bring them together and get them moving on an issue that's identified with their needs.
>
> This brings us to an extremely important observation about the character and function of the *Transitional Program*. It is not designed as a program **for the vanguard** *(the revolutionary party) --ed.);* it is part of the program **of the vanguard.**

We don't hug it to our bosoms and raise it as a shibboleth around which we gather as a sect. That's totally alien to the spirit and method of the *Transitional Program*. It's a set of proposals for action and organization offered by the revolutionary party, first for consideration and discussion, and then adoption by the masses or specific sections of them. It's a tool-kit for action. Each one of its recommendations is useful to do a particular job.

The underlying and ultimate objective of the application of the *Transitional Program* in real life is to set masses into motion against the authorities and institutions of established society, culminating in the confrontation of class forces in a showdown struggle for supremacy in the nation. A party really concerned with that type of struggle,

and resolved to win it, has to involve first thousands, then millions in co-ordinated action. We're still a small minority of propagandists, but we think big! Every piece has to fit into that pattern and serve that goal.

The spontaneists, anarchists, sectarians, schematists don't have an inkling of what this is all about because they don't understand the essence of Marxism and Bolshevism as a guide to action. Action which goes beyond involving small numbers of people, although that is necessary because it's the basis and beginning of everything else, but action in which vast numbers participate. Our emphasis is always on mobilizing masses, although we recognize that propagandizing and agitating for these ideas, which take up a lot of our time, energy and resources, is a continuous educational process issuing in such action.

As a last point, I would like to discuss the place of democratic slogans in three categories of countries. The first concerns the backward *(today we would say 'developing, third-world' – Ed.)* countries.

The (well-known)["] theory of permanent revolution *["]* teaches that in countries which have not gone through their bourgeois-democratic revolution and the main tasks solved by that kind of revolution in previous centuries in the more advanced countries still remain to be taken care of, the mass struggles for change inexorably have a combined character. They fuse democratic demands, such as for agrarian reform and for national liberation or unification of the country with socialist ones. That is the case of Ireland to day, where the fight for national liberation and unification, as well as the overthrow of clericalism is inseparably united with revolutionary working class perspectives.

The people of Bangla Desh are at the same point of struggle for their national independence and social liberation. Under such circumstances national-democratic demands and objectives are pushed to the forefront. The second category of countries are the fascist ones. At the time the *Transitional Program* was written, fascism was spreading like a black stain over the map of Europe and in its aggressive expansion was threatening other parts of the world as well. In those countries where the brown- or black-shirts had taken power the oppositional activities of the masses of people and especially the revolutionary elements were reduced to very elementary levels indeed. In that totalitarian atmosphere where the right to survival was in question, it was a bold gesture to express a difference, let alone a dissent.

I remember a very interesting episode in 1935. Hitler had consolidated his power and coordinated everything in the Third Reich. The labor movement and all oppositional parties had been suppressed. The only organized institution with the slightest autonomy in Germany was the Catholic church. The Catholic bishops got a little crosswise with Hitler's regime. What the precise issue was I do not recall, but that's not important. What was at stake was the right of an uncoordinated body to assert their variant position.

Trotsky advised our comrades to support this struggle of the church on a democratic basis. He argued in this way. "We are not clericalists in any sense. However, this is a demand raised by an institution supported by masses of people who are not completely contented with the fascist setup. The conflict can be used under the given circumstances as an entering wedge. If the church gets away with its mild defiance of the fascist regime, other, progressive forces, including the revolutionary ones, can take advantage of the opening, try to widen it a little, show people that something can still be done and fascism is not all-powerful ."

This is a very instructive example because the bearers of the democratic demand and the immediate beneficiaries of it were completely foreign to everything our movement stood for. In the fascist countries or any other unrestrained dictatorship, it's obvious common sense that the struggle for democracy takes first place because the people have no rights they can exercise on their own account. All power is concentrated in the hands of the totalitarian regime and it is then a matter of life and death to get room to breathe and raise a dissenting voice.

Sometimes I wonder what kind of a world the sectarians think they live in and what kind of history they ever studied! We who lived during the heyday of fascism know full well how crucial the elementary struggle for democracy can be. Those who maintain that the defense or extension of democratic demands isn't important don't live in the real world of class struggle.

The third category of democratic slogans referred to in the *Transitional Program* has to to with the degenerated and deformed workers states.* *(see note below --ed.)* In 1938 they applied solely to the Soviet Union; nowadays they have much wider application. Before the Soviet Union came into being it was assumed by many supporters of socialism that once the workers had taken power and the capitalists and their institutions were eliminated, the struggle for democracy would decline and fade away quite quickly. As we know, that has not been the case for reasons we have frequently explained (read *The Revolution Betrayed* by Trotsky, or the last chapters in *Democracy and Revolution*, by myself.) Not only does the struggle for democracy not stop with the overthrow of capitalism, but in certain respects it can be posed more acutely.

Oppressed women, Blacks and members of oppressed nationalities instinctively sense this possibility. They say: "What's going to happen to us once the existing system is replaced by socialism? Are we really going to get what we're fighting for and what we expect?" They are somewhat suspicious and reserved about the prospects of equality after the revolution and want to be shown.

The people in the bureaucratized "workers' states"* *(with socialized economies – see definition at the end --Ed.)* have even more urgent reasons to demand their rights. The *Transitional Program* presents a whole series of demands which are directed against the deprivation of rights in the "workers' states." Since 1938 these have had to be considerably amplified, as the first seven demands for the situation there from *The Worldwide Youth Radicalization and the Tasks of the Fourth International,* page 25,

indicate:

1) Freedom of discussion on philosophical, cultural and scientific questions. The right to express a critical viewpoint.

2) Freedom to discuss historical questions. Let the truth come out.

5) Freedom to discuss current political issues.

4) Abolish the censorship.

5) For the right to organize and demonstrate.

6) No political persecution. Let the public, including foreign observers, be admitted to our trials.

7) Freedom of travel. No restrictions on sending representatives to visit youth organizations in other countries, or in receiving their representatives on visits.

These specific democratic demands have been added to our transitional program because they have been brought forward in real life by the developing political revolution for workers democracy in these countries. We didn't dream them up. The students, the progressive and anti-bureaucratic elements want them, want them in large measure, want them now! That is why the Fourth International has taken cognizance of them and incorporated them in its transitional program.

The elementary law of contemporary history, the law of uneven and combined development, applies not only to sectors of the world which are historically retarded but to the most advanced countries. The SWP *(US Socialist Workers Party)* and YSA *(Young Socialists' Alliance, the politically autonomous youth group in solidarity with the SWP until the 1980s – Web Ed.)* maintain that the coming American revolution will be a combination of the anticapitalist movements of the workers for socialism with the struggles of the oppressed national minorities, the struggle for women's Liberation, for gay liberation, for abolition of the prison system, and so on. These are all democratic struggles whose aims can be achieved only through the overthrow of capitalism and the construction of a socialist society. **At the recent plenum of the YSA national committee I heard a Black comrade state: "The majority of mankind is today deprived of elementary democratic rights and want self-determination." That is absolutely true. We are partisans of the proletarian revolution. We further understand that the struggle for the proletarian revolution can pass through the struggle for elementary democratic demands which we support and implement by our own methods.** *(Emphasis by the Web Ed.)*

A durable and thoroughgoing democracy can be achieved, in either the backward or advanced countries, only through the victory of the working class and its allies, resulting in the overthrow of capitalism. That's the main thesis of the theory of permanent revolution. And it's likewise the last word of the *Transitional Program* on the role of democratic slogans in our epoch.

III. SOME QUESTIONS ABOUT THE PROGRAM

This final talk will deal with some misconceptions about the *Transitional Program* and try to make clear its pattern as a whole. It's important not to have a fetishistic attitude towards the *Transitional Program*. In general, Marxists are opposed to taking a worshipful attitude towards anything in this world, including the deity, moral codes, state institutions, parties or charismatic leaders.

The contents of the program are not engraved on tablets coming down from Mt. Sinai which are henceforth sacred and inviolable. We could hardly have such an attitude towards a program which we ourselves participated in fashioning. When you know how something is made you can have a practical, realistic, scientific attitude toward it.

The (US) Workers League and the French Lambertists *(Trotskyist tendencies of the time --ed.)* have a rather different manner of treating the Transitional Program that accords with their sectarian mentalities.

Take the attitude of the Healy-Wohlforth *(British-American)* leaders and their disciples, for example, towards the role of philosophy in the Marxist movement. We believe that a correct philosophical method is indispensable for the analysis of the world and its phenomena, including social and political questions. But we don't make a fetish of philosophy and elevate it to the point where it is viewed as the be-all, and end-all, of political life. These Talmudists are the reverse of Burnham *(former SWP leader and faction leader).* If you have read *In Defense of Marxism (against the petite-bourgeois opposition, by Leon Trotsky), (who participated in the seminal 1939-1940 struggle within the SWP --ed.)* , you are aware that Burnham held the position that philosophy had nothing to do with politics, and dialectical materialism in particular was valueless in dealing with political issues and struggle. The Wohlforthites have turned that false conception inside out. Instead of maintaining that philosophy is of no account in politics, they contend that philosophy is everything in politics and accuse us of being "empiricists" because we insist that the facts of reality as disclosed by social practice are decisive for Marxists.

The *Transitional Program* is not forever fixed and finalized. The Lambertists accuse us of tampering with this holy of holies by adding to it and recognizing that great changes have occurred since it was written. They want to preserve the Ark of the Covenant in a mummified way. When we propose to modify this or that aspect of the program on the ground that it is not complete, they shriek that we have abandoned Trotsky. Actually, they are the ones who violate the conception and purpose of the program.

Neither as a whole, nor in application to a particular country, is the *Transitional Program* a static one. That could be deduced simply from the facts that the four categories of countries involved stand on different levels of development — and that there are three distinct categories of demands. So there must be differences among them and in their application. In fact they are constantly being amended by the various national sections, and the American Trotskyists have been one of the most energetic and

productive in this respect.

The *(SWP pamphlet)* "Transitional Program for Black Liberation" illustrates how we have been working this out. After a listing of a long set of demands there is this concluding remark: "Most of the proposals listed above have been brought forward at one time or another in the course of the Black liberation struggle over the past years. Others are taken from the experiences of the masses elsewhere in fighting against capitalist domination. A program of this sort cannot be fully finalized or frozen. It has to remain flexible and open-ended with plenty of room for additions and improvement, as the struggle develops and new problems come to the fore." (p. 9)

Moreover, the demands in the *Transitional Program* do not comprise the whole of our program. The totality of what we stand and fight for extends from the *Communist Manifesto* through the latest documents of the Fourth International at its congresses and its statements on interim questions and the decisions and documents of our party. The transitional demands consist of proposals for propaganda, agitation and action directed toward mobilizing the masses.

> By and large they cover a distinct period of struggle. This extends from the time when the masses are only preparing themselves to contest supremacy with the capitalists up to the point where they actually do it. That is the transitional period proper for which the proposals are intended.
>
> The actual set of transitional demands presented by the different national sections of our world movement must differ in different countries because the conditions are different, the relationship of social forces is different, the 1evel of development is different. In a colonial or semi-colonial country where the bourgeois-democratic revolution has barely gotten off the ground, where the peasantry is the predominant part of the population, and which does not have national independence or unity, Marxists cannot put forward the same type of transitional program as in an advanced country that has already gone through its bourgeois-democratic revolution, is a seat of imperialist power and has a powerful proletariat and industrial development.

To make this contrast more vivid, consider the program (that) Ernest Mandel made for the Belgian trade unions that appeared in the June 20, 1970 issue of *La Gauche*. Here are the eight proposals: 1) nationalization of banks and all credit institutions, 2) transfer of big business to the nation, 3) socialist planning of the economy, 4) the expansion and democratization of public consumption, i.e., free medical care, greater participation in teaching, a genuine liberation of women and so on, 5) the choice of workers control as the principal axis of trade union propaganda and action, 6) the practice of trade union democracy based on general assemblies in the big factories, local and regional assemblies in other sectors, 7) a halt to the integration of the trade unions into neo-capitalism, 8) for genuinely international trade union action.

It should be obvious that we could not present such a program to the AFL-CIO at its convention. That would not at all relate to the stage of development or level of consciousness of the trade union movement in the United States, not

even to the most advanced militants of the unions. In Belgium on the other hand the Social Democratic party is a mass party and has for decades held hegemony over the working class. The workers there are saturated with socialist traditions and would like to see a socialist revolution, at least in prospect.

Thus for thousands and tens of thousands of ordinary trade unionists in Belgium, this is an appealing and realistic set of proposals, even though it envisages setting up of a dual power in that country.

Consider the appropriateness of the proposal for a Labor party in the United States. The *Transitional Program* itself contains no mention of a labor party. This is for good reason. This problem is peculiar to our country which is the most politically backward of all the advanced capitalisms. It is the only one in which the workers have not cut loose from the capitalist parties and formed a political organization of their own, whether it's Social Democratic, Laborite or Communist. Even the workers of Canada launched such a party at the beginning of the 1960s, the New Democratic Party. Many of them belong to the same International unions of steel workers, auto workers and teamsters, as the workers below the border. We adopted the perspective of a labor party as a result of the same discussions on the *Transitional Program* Trotsky had with our comrades in 1938, though the idea was presented to the party in a separate document and as an independent proposal. Since the labor party proposal was intended to mobilize the masses of American workers for an independent political course, we viewed it as a very important transitional demand.

Since then the idea has had its ups and downs. At several times it moved to the point of agitation in certain unions. But it has never become a proposal for national action, nor has it been acted upon by any significant section of the U.S. trade union movement. Since we favored the formation of a labor party, our task has been limited to propaganda and unfortunately that's the way it is today. We continue to explain its necessity to the advanced workers.

The Workers League takes a different approach. They push it forward as a central slogan for action on any and all occasions, regardless of circumstances. For them it is a universal panacea repeated by rote and imposed by ultimatum on any and all mass struggles. They thereby make a mockery of this transitional demand.

How do we put forward the *Transitional Program*? We don't throw it at an individual worker or workers en bloc — "here it is, take it or leave it," because they're going to leave it and not take it if it is presented in this manner. Nor do we bring forward proposals all at one time. I compared the program to a multipurpose tool-kit, and so we do what a good craftsman does with it. If there's a particular job to be done, look in the kit for the particular tool that is best suited for the job. Take out of the *Transitional Program* whatever is timely and appropriate for the degree of development of the mass movement, the consciousness of the masses, their readiness to act on this or that element of the program. And if it doesn't contain the right one for the occasion, it may be necessary to devise one or two.

That is where the art of leadership comes in. It's one of the tests of a leader or

> leaders to be able to size up a situation and tell which one of the tools at our disposal can best advance the movement of the masses. You'll never become a good leader of our movement if you simply proceed by rote without first analyzing the facts in the situation at hand. That determines what demands are in order.

There is another misunderstanding about the nature of the *Transitional Program*. Some think its demands pertain and appeal exclusively to the working class. That's wrong. This can be verified simply by reading the text of the program which covers and fits the needs of all sectors of the oppressed: the peasants, youth, women and sections of the middle classes.

> We haven't worked out a program for the American peasants, because we don't have so many. There are only about 5 million farmers compared with 9 and a half million college students in this country. Thus the student population which is in effervescence is for us more important than the farm population, politically speaking. Even the small farmers who are being wiped out are now not in the center of our attention. Indeed several years ago we amended our transitional demand for a new regime from "a workers and farmers government" to "a workers' government." We may require an extensive set of demands for the small farmers in the future as we have had them in the past, especially in Minnesota. However, it remains a peripheral concern for us.

But imagine that lack in the Socialist Workers Party of India where the peasantry is the overwhelming part of the population, the agrarian problem is an excruciating one, and there are many armed struggles between landlords and cultivators. It would be an unforgivable omission for the SWP of India simply to present a program of demands for the proletariat of India and ignore the needs of the peasants. This not only points up the contrast between countries very sharply, but also demonstrates the multi-class scope of the *Transitional Program*.

In relation to the American scene we have had to work out sets of transitional demands for the different forces involved in social struggle in the current radicalization. This is explained in the document "Toward a Mass Feminist Movement" which has seven categories of demands. They are introduced as follows:

"A revolutionary strategy for the feminist movement must be based on a program of democratic and transitional demands, rooted in the needs of the masses of women, and part of the broader transitional program of the socialist revolution. A program of struggle around such demands will have a revolutionary logic because they mobilize masses against the ruling class and its government, and to win them in full requires a socialist revolution.

"The key question facing the revolutionary socialist party, then, is how to help mobilize masses of women — around what demands, and through what forms can this be done, related to the immediate needs and level of understanding of the masses of women.

"No full program for the women's liberation movement has yet been worked out, and it

is impossible, at this time, to develop such a full program of demands. However, the broad outlines of such a program have begun to emerge and some of the key demands are already clear."

This is the motivation for the seven categories. In addition, there are sub-categories of women for whom specific demands are presented in the document. These are women prisoners and women of oppressed nationalities. In this way transitional demands become more and more concretized.

We may soon have a draft of a comparable program for prisoners because the prisons have become revolutionary universities. They are hotbeds of protest and rebellion, as Attica and other prison revolts attest. Indeed, one segment of the mass movement has already been a bit ahead of us on this score. The recent Chicano conference at Denver decided to support the establishment of a union for Chicanos and Chicanas in prison. As you are aware, we have drafted a specific set of transitional demands for Chicano liberation at this particular point of the movement's development which was adopted at our 1971 convention.

> The purpose of transitional demands, it has been emphasized, is to further the mobilization of the masses. This is pertinent to the controversy within the Feminist movement, echoed in our own ranks, over the merits of the slogans for free abortion on demand versus repeal of all abortion laws. Both of these demands are good ones and are incorporated in our tool kit. However, that doesn't solve the **tactical question**: which one is better suited to bringing the largest number of women together in the first national mass action of the feminist movement? This was the decisive consideration in the judgment of our comrades who selected repeal of all abortion laws. They decided on the less radical slogan at this stage of the development of the movement. They didn't discard the other one. They simply put it on a different level, for propaganda rather than immediate mass action. At the same time that one slogan is advanced to mobilize the largest number of women for action in the streets, the other remains as part of our broader program.

The choice of one rather than the other conforms to the assertion in the *Transitional Program*, page 9: "The achievement of this strategic task (that is, the conquest of power) is unthinkable without the most considered attention to all, even small and partial questions of tactics." The more far-reaching demand may be the incorrect one if conditions don't warrant its broad acceptance and it has less capacity to mobilize masses. The slogan for the formation of Soviets is in the program but if we called for it tomorrow, what response would it get? The most radical demand is not always the right one, as the ultralefts and sectarians believe. It is necessary to function in the real world if you're going to be a revolutionist and get rid of this monstrous imperialist power. You can't substitute your desires or your imagination for the realities of the class struggle. And we want to be the most realistic of all revolutionaries and revolutionary organizations: to start from what is, in order to change it most effectively.

The *Transitional Program* proposes workers' control of production and Mandel *(a*

leader of the Fourth International based in Europe – Ed.) proposes to make that the central axis of' propaganda by the Belgian trade unions today. That is correct in my opinion. Our co-thinkers, along with other left elements in Western Europe, have been carrying on a consistent propaganda campaign for workers control of production. Mandel just published a book of selections on the whole problem. But we in the United States can't do that yet, we're too undeveloped. We can certainly try to teach the value and necessity of that demand to our own members and transmit it to the public in general theoretical articles. But we can't go beyond that point yet.

A realistic revolutionist must cultivate a very keen sense for the timing and placement of correct slogans. It is indispensable to understand the difference between propagandistic work and proposals for action by large numbers of people.

What is realizable and what is not realizable from the program under capitalist domination? I pointed out that the right to vote for 18 year-olds, which is in the program, is now in the United States Constitution. Certain democratic and partial demands can be realized to one degree or another in the course of the struggle under capitalism.

But other crucial demands have a different dynamic and status. They set the most combative elements of the proletariat into motion and are intended to culminate in a confrontation by the insurgent masses with the capitalist rulers, and the organization of a counter-power. One demand of this type is workers' control of production. It is in the long run incompatible with capitalist control of production. The capitalist profiteers cannot permit the workers in a factory or an industry to have an effective and lasting veto power over the way the industry is run. On the other hand, the workers themselves, once they acquire a certain measure of control, either have to go forward to complete control or give up the measure of veto power they have acquired over the decisions of the bosses. One or the other class must come out on top and be the paramount decision makers. That issue has to be fought out to a finish.

The following passage from page 16 of the *Transitional Program* pertains to this point:

> "From the moment that the committee makes its appearance, a factual dual power is established in the factory. By its very essence it represents the transitional state because it includes in itself two irreconcilable regimes: the capitalist and the proletarian. The fundamental significance of factory committees is precisely contained in the fact that they open tho door if not to a direct revolutionary, then to a pre-revolutionary period — between the bourgeois and the proletarian regimes,"

The same holds true on the level of political organization. The crowning demand of the *Transitional Program* is for the formation of Soviets arising from representative committees of action by the masses. Such committees, which constitute a dual power, are likewise incompatible with parliamentary institutions designed to defend the property, power and influence of the ruling class. It's their antithesis, whether or not the participants understand that. Once workers, peasants or soldiers councils are brought

into being, the issue has to be decided by the further struggle of the contending forces which can eventuate in civil war.

Here is what is said on this matter on page 59 of the *Transitional Program*:

> "The **slogan of Soviets** crowns the program of transitional demands. Soviets can arise only at the time when the mass movement enters into an open revolutionary stage. From the first moment of their appearance, the Soviets, acting as a pivot around which millions of toilers are united in their struggle against the exploiters, become competitors and opponents of local authorities and then of the central government. If the factory committee creates a dual power in the factory, then the Soviets initiate a period of dual power in the country."

It's possible for factory committees, or committees of action, of the workers, to be quickly transformed into the equivalent of Soviets and take on more and more of the administrative powers in a locality, a region, and ultimately in the entire country. That began to take place in a minimal fashion during the May-June events in France, and you can read what happened in one particular locality (Nantes) in *France In Revolt (available from Pathfinder Press, New York).*

The grand strategy outlined in the *Transitional Program* runs through all the intermediate steps and tactical decisions that its goal requires. The aim is to unite and mobilize the masses in a revolutionary struggle capable of transferring supremacy to them in the nation so the workers can go ahead and begin building the new society.

The concluding point concerns the problem of leadership bound up with the formation and reinforcement of the cadres of the revolutionary party. The opening section of the *Transitional Program* says: "The present crisis in human culture is the crisis in the proletarian leadership." It's not only the proletariat as a whole that suffers from inadequacy of leadership. After 15 years of intense action and ferment, the Black liberation struggle in the U.S. is largely leaderless and disorganized. The lack of leadership, or misleadership, is even more obvious in the trade union movement. As for the student movement, SDS *(Students for a Democratic Society --ed.),* which was the dominant organization among radical students in the 1960s, came to a very bad end. The prime responsibility for providing the leadership required has now been transferred to the YSA *(Young Socialist Alliance, independent youth group associated to the then Socialist Workers Party-U.S. – SWP – Ed.)*

Cadres, like Rome, are not built in a day. We've been working at it in this country now for about 45 years, and what we have is assembled at this convention *(of the U.S. SWP – Web Ed.)*

The components of our cadres are formed through prolonged experiences and testing in actual struggles. These take place both in the broader mass movements and in the controversies that periodically beset the revolutionary vanguard when it comes to grips with new turns in the situation and new problems requiring new tactics and new solutions. Through these processes, over a period of time, people are tested, sifted out,

and their quality as cadres becomes discernible. The cadres of the SWP and YSA are the heirs to a mighty tradition, and have a rich treasury of ideas in the field of revolution. This is placed at their disposal when they enter our movement. The present generation has already begun to assimilate it, apply it and even add to it in the various transitional programs that have been developed as well as in the talks reprinted in *Towards an American Socialist Revolution: A Strategy for the 1970s.*

By assimilating the spirit and method of the *Transitional Program*, by avoiding the pitfalls of opportunism on the one side and sectarianism on the other, they are helping to overcome the crisis of leadership for the revolutionary forces in this country.

(end)

**NOTE on the term "workers' state": this was the Trotskyist characterization of the bureaucratized "workers' states" applies to countries with nationalized economies, such as those in Eastern Europe occupied by the Red (Russian Soviet) Army after World War 2 --East Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and the Baltic states (all with installed regimes owing allegiance to the Soviet Stalinist regime), including the then Marshall Tito-led Yugoslavian federation [Bosnia, Kosovo and Serbia; independent of Soviet Russian Stalinism.] as well as China, and North Vietnam and North Korea, also "workers' states," all with state-controlled economies, within the Chinese [Stalinist] orbit. The notably unique exception to orthodox Stalinist control was Cuba, in which the July 26 Movement achieved its revolutionary conquest of power independently, enjoying sustained mass support and maintaining a great degree of political sovereignty over Soviet bureaucratic rule manifested though Cuba's economic dependency exacerbated under the decades-long US economic blockade -- Web ed. note)*